# The Christian News-Letter

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Edited by J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

The choice of Dr. Temple as the new Archbishop of Canterbury will be welcomed far beyond the bounds of the Church of England or of British Christianity. No one has taken a more prominent part in the movement for closer co-operation between the Churches in both the national and the international spheres. No one is more highly esteemed and trusted by the leaders of the Churches in other countries ; this fact together with his unsurpassed gifts as a master of assemblies made him in the eyes of everyone the inevitable choice as Chairman of the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches. His interest in social questions is known to all and finds expression in the Penguin Special, which appears at the moment of his appointment as Primate of All England, *Christianity and the Social Order*. He has in an exceptional degree the ear of youth. He has been a warm friend of the News-Letter from the beginning and has written for it two Supplements. He enters on his new, high office at a critical hour in the history both of the Church and of the nation and needs, as he assuredly will have, the prayers of us all.

## THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

I quoted him in a recent News-Letter (C.N-L. 119) as saying that Christian activity in relation to society has to be carried out at three distinct levels. One is the definition of aims and principles, with which certain recent formulations are mainly concerned. The second is that of right action in concrete situations. This will be dealt with in next week's Supplement. The third, and most fundamental, level is defined by the Archbishop as that of preaching the Gospel in its purity but also in its fulness. This is true, because the central facts of the Gospel story are the undying source of the power of Christianity. Men are not roused to action by abstract principles, even when these obtain their intellectual assent. The only force which can break the power of established habits and release fresh emotional energies is a new apprehension of the crucial issues of life. This is what knowledge of the Gospel, when it is fully apprehended, does for men. When genuine religious knowledge is wanting, the empty place is filled by substitute religions, like Nazism and Communism, which are able for a time to capture the imagination and evoke an enthusiastic response.

It is at this deepest level that our need of renewal is greatest. The root of the frustration of which we are all conscious is that the essential forms of Christian imagination and experience, such as those of a future life, of forgiveness and salvation, of belief in the active working of the Holy Spirit, have for large numbers of people, including many who are members of the Churches, lost their compelling force and are no longer able to awaken a strong emotional response. One of our members whose judgment carries great weight, wrote recently that " one is painfully conscious of the mutilated condition of the imagination amongst theologians." The Gospel we know to be dynamite, but somehow we are not blown up.

## THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

The following letter from the Principal of one of our universities forcibly presents one aspect of the problem :

" In the *Christian News-Letter* you have given us all a lead in the consideration of great issues and have suggested the indubitably right solutions. Can you sometime help us to the solution of a problem which looks by comparison trivial but is really important. May I try to state it ? I will begin with three quotations :—

" (1) ' Words fall on deaf ears when they make no contact with living experience.' (The C.N-L.)

" (2) ' In the years before the present war the French people were beginning to recognise the true countenance of Christianity. Much remained to be done. The new language which was necessary in order to establish communication between Christianity and the masses, for a century unfamiliar with religious vocabulary, was still to be discovered.' (Jacques Maritain)

" (3) ' The Swedish nation is ready to respond to the Christian message more than it has been for a long time, and expects this message to be presented in such a way that a modern man can really understand it to be the liberating word.' (The Swedish Minister of Cults, quoted in the C.N-L.)

" The terminology of Christian worship and popular theology is understood by many clergy, though few interpret it to their congregations. To many older people, brought up in the traditions of a Church, it is sacred and dear, but for many of these its familiarity obscures and distorts its meaning. To the ears of those outside the Church, ' unfamiliar with religious vocabulary,' much of the terminology sounds either meaningless or contemptible. To very many churchgoers what they hear in Church has only the soothing effect of incantation. Outsiders ' ready to respond to the Christian message ' but uninstructed in the meaning of our terminology, go away complaining that Christianity is anthropomorphic, polytheistic and materialistic—either blasphemy or nonsense.

" Here is a simple example of misuse obscured by familiarity. In the Anglican liturgy the taking of money as an offertory is preceded by the words ' Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works.' Some clergy, awake to the blasphemy, choose an alternative sentence ; others thoughtlessly repeat it. And there's the danger—the idea that in Church one needn't think what one is saying. There is no need to multiply examples. What is ' the modern man ' to understand by ' Grace,' ' Redemption,' ' Atonement,' ' Remission of Sins,' or by ' Glory,' that tarnished tinsel in which—so it sounds to these outsiders—God takes peculiar pleasure ? Many prayers and hymns contain phrases which for some are empty of meaning and by others are grievously misunderstood.

" Listen, Oldham. With a rational reverence for which readers of the C.N-L. cannot be too grateful you have shown us that the sort of ' reconstruction ' desired by all men and women of good will can be achieved only by the direction of a Christian motive, and that Christian motive grows only out of Christian faith. Otherwise it withers in bad weather. If it is true, as you and I and Jacques Maritain and that Swedish Minister believe, that the spread of Christian faith is disastrously impeded by the use of a vocabulary which is outmoded, difficult and most easily misunderstood, what is to be done about it ? How can ' the liberating ' word be found, which will ' reveal the true countenance of Christianity,' ' make contact with living experience ' and not ' fall on deaf ears ' but be heard by ' modern men ' who have ears to hear ? "

The question raised by the writer of the letter relates primarily to the language of *worship*. This is a problem that most urgently needs to be tackled—for the sake not less of those who are conscious of no difficulty, and who through familiarity have become impervious to the cutting edge of the Christian message, than of those to whom the language, not only of the liturgy, but of the Bible has become alien and unintelligible. But the question opens out into the wider problem of the understanding of Christianity by the modern mind.

The problem will never be dealt with adequately until it is recognised that the Church is attempting, broadly speaking, to accomplish two quite different tasks by one and the same set of methods. There are, in fact, two wholly different kinds of audience to be reached.

There are, first, those who have been brought up in the Christian tradition. Even if they have wandered far from the Christian faith, it is something that they once knew—if not in any deep personal experience, at least as reflected in the beliefs, motives and behaviour of those with whom they were closely associated. There are patterns implanted in their experience to which they can come back.

But multitudes, more particularly in the younger generation, are in a very different case. They have never known the patterns of Christian experience. There is nothing in their experience with which the key words of the Gospel can make a link. They have no awareness, however dim, of something missing, as those have who have once had contact with a living Christianity.

The regular services of the Church inherited from a time when the Christian tradition prevailed more widely than to-day, are directed to meeting the needs of the first type of audience. A disproportionately small part of the energies of the Church are seriously devoted to the service of the second. Things will never be right until the two tasks are clearly distinguished in thought, and a sufficient proportion of the resources of the Church devoted to the discovery of entirely new methods of dealing with the second. Nothing would do more to vitalise ordinary congregational preaching and teaching than a determined, large-scale attempt to discover how those who stand outside may be helped to see (as they do not at present in the least see) how Christian faith is to-day a live option and at what points it is relevant to the life of present society.

The great mass of those for whom the key words of Christianity have completely lost their meaning will not be reached until enough Christians can give enough time to meet with non-Christians in situations in which, to begin with, the non-Christians do nearly all the talking and the Christians listen and learn. One of our members has sent me an account of a weekly discussion group which he is conducting in a university centre. It consists of Christians and non-Christians, students and townsfolk, and decided by a unanimous vote to study this winter " The Case *against* Christianity." The syllabus includes the attack from the side of natural science, history, anthropology, comparative religion, psychology, the fact of evil, objections to Christian doctrines, objections to the character of Christians, objections based on the record of the Church and so forth. This seems to me a most promising experiment.

The News-Letter is trying to make its modest contribution to the problem—as, for example, in the Supplement to C.N-L. 112 on " All Real Life is Meeting." You cannot understand what John Macmurray and Martin Buber are really saying without coming pretty near to the central questions of Christianity ; you are in a world in which their relevance is apparent. But John Macmurray and Martin Buber, and H. A. Hodges in his recent Supplement, are talking the language of their contemporaries in a way that most current presentations of Christianity do not.

Our need is to discover afresh in experience the meaning of the great Christian assertions in relation to the experience of life which we share with our contemporaries. Few of those whom I know have a deeper understanding of this than John Middleton Murry. He says in a letter :

"I liked Hodges' Supplement very much. From the angle of his approach it was a masterly statement of the modern conflict. One sentence particularly struck me : 'Christianity, like all religions, moves in a sphere where precise observation and statement are hard to achieve, and experiment in the accepted sense is impossible.' This is true. And yet, I think, we cannot emphasise too strongly that Christianity is an experimental religion. To my sense, it is because Christianity refuses to become an experimental religion that, by and large, it has no dynamic. It is, or should be, experimental in the world of conduct. ' Seek ye first the Kingdom of God . . . ' The Christian is required to plunge into the wilderness of life, as it were with a mere compass-bearing, without a *map*. There have been Christian maps. When we speak of a Christian civilisation, we mean a period when there was an accepted Christian map of human experience.

" To-day, the Christian maps are out of date. Nobody travels by them. Christians pretend to ; and that makes them despised. Possibly a new Christian map will be drawn up, when there will be a new Christian civilisation. But in the meanwhile, it must be recognised that Christianity has to become experimental again, as it was in its early centuries. We have to admit that we now have a compass-bearing, but no map, and take the plunge into the wilderness, in the spirit of Blake's words : ' What is the price of experience ? Do men buy it for a song, or wisdom for a dance in the street ? No, it is bought with the price of all that a man hath ! ' "

## REGISTRATION OF YOUTH

The Rev. H. A. Hamilton, the secretary of the Young Peoples' Department of the Congregational Union, and at present the minister of a church in Bolton, writes :

" In connection with the News-Letter in which you deal with the registration of youth, you may be interested to know what the Churches in Bolton have done to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the new Youth Service.

" Our first concern was to establish good relations with the leaders of the new Youth Centres, and a representative group met with them to discover in what ways the Churches could be of service in the town's official Youth Centres. After a suspicious opening, our offers were cordially received, and we have now one minister linked up with each of the Youth Centres with a right of entry and (in most cases) a practical contribution to make in the life of the Centre. These ministers have been nominated by the Council of Christian Congregations of the town, and were chosen because they were the right men rather than to represent each denomination.

" We are trying to show our young people in the Churches that this Youth Service is a challenge to them and have had two Training Courses in Leadership for them under the auspices of the Local Youth Committee and with their specialist help. There is quite a remarkable interest in these courses, and those so trained are welcomed as leaders and helpers in the Youth Centres.

" The clergy and ministers in each area of the town are surveying their own district and planning together to meet its needs. We want to avoid the dangers of the dual system in this new sphere, but we also want to make sure that by pooling the resources of the Churches in an area, the best possible service is given to our own young people."

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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